

House Education Committee
Testimony of Birgit McQuiston
Michigan Citizens Advocating for Public Education
November 29, 2011

Honorable members of the House Education Committee: good morning/ afternoon, and thank you for allowing me to address you today. My name is Birgit McQuiston. I am a parent, community member, a recently elected member of the Lake Orion Community Schools Board of Education, and founding member of Michigan Citizens Advocating for Public Education (MI-CAPE). I am here today representing MI-CAPE to express our opposition to SB 618 which would uncap Charter Schools in Michigan. Specifically, we are concerned with the lack of quality assurance with the uncapping of the allotment of Charter Schools. In addition, we are concerned about the lack of financial accountability and transparency surrounding the profit margins of both the authorizers as well as the Charter School Managers.

A wise teacher once said: we often don't need to be taught, we simply need to be reminded. With that in mind, I would like to read for you a portion of Governor Snyder's Education Reform Message from April of this year:

"In order to create dynamic, performance-based school districts in Michigan we need to challenge the status quo. Charter schools play an important role by offering an alternative education option to parents and students, particularly in our struggling districts. We need to increase the number of charter schools in Michigan to help attract the **top charter operators** from across the nation and encourage more choice at the local level.

Therefore, I am **proposing that any caps limiting the number of charter schools in districts with at least one academically failing school be removed.** This will allow for more charters in areas where additional education options are needed the most." (end quote)

It is hard to ignore the Governor's intent for attracting QUALITY charter schools to our state. Thus, the question that begs to be asked and answered is: why doesn't SB 618 address this issue?

Why is the legislature setting the stage for low performing schools that are sure to be added to districts already struggling in this arena? Why set children up for failure? Instead of saying that failing Charter Schools can be closed, why not prevent low-performing Charters from opening in the first place? Governor Snyder was clear in his desire for attracting top performing charter schools as a mechanism of change for the districts with failing schools. SB 618, however, reads more like a bill that gives favor to any Charter School desiring to open its doors in Michigan instead of providing a real academic opportunity for children in failing schools. Why is that?

Charter School Authorizers make approximately three percent off of the SAF dollars of the students in their charters. Under current law, they are required to keep this fund separate for their costs and expenses as authorizers. State Universities and Community Colleges that are Charter School Authorizers will not be required to continue this practice with this new legislation. In other words, that money – the three percent of the SAF dollars that they accrue from their contracts as a Charter School Authorizer -- can feasibly go into their budgets as they see fit, without any accountability or transparency to the public! Currently, being a Charter School Authorizer is a multi-million dollar industry in our state, and will be an even bigger industry with this legislation. This can be construed as yet another raid on the school aid fund! It is the blatant use of taxpayer dollars intended for public schools without any transparency or accountability. This is unacceptable.

The profit accrued by the Education Management Organizers of Charter School Chains is also taxpayer dollars taken in without accountability or transparency. Why is the legislature so willing to hand out tax dollars from the School Aid Fund to companies without requiring financial accountability and transparency? As a taxpayer, this display of inequitable accountability is concerning since public schools are required to fully disclose their finances on their websites.

Many political campaigns are run on mottos that boast of "Quality, Accountability and Transparency." Unfortunately SB 618 lacks all of these attributes. Therefore, on behalf of MI-CAPE, I am asking that you oppose SB 618.